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ABSTRACT

This examination of the impact of primary sources on the recording of history includes a short background section noting the development of interest in these sources, and a presentation of their characteristics and the various types that are available. A discussion of primary sources in research, prefaced by some examples of their use, traces trends in specialized archival institutions in professional associations, academic environments, business, and genealogy. Finally, oral history is examined in terms of its benefits as a unique primary source, common criticisms, and the need for evaluation of recorded materials. A 72-item bibliography concludes the paper. (SW)

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PRIMARY SOURCES: THE UNIQUE RESOURCE

A STATE OF THE ART PAPER

by

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I

INTRODUCTION

The writing of history, or historiography, developed into a systematic science by the works of the nineteenth century German historians, foremost among whom was Leopold Von Ranke. Ranke, regarded as "the father of modern historical science" (1)* did more than any other scholar to dethrone the memoir and the chronicle, both of which were the basic sources of history up to the nineteenth century. Ranke felt that his primary task was to present the past "as it actually happened" (2) without personal, political or any form of ideological bias which characterized much of what was termed history. The novelty of Ranke's first book, his study of Latin and Teutonic Nations at the Close of the Middle Ages, was due to the fact that he had made a careful analysis of the sources of information. These studies may be regarded as the first supreme example of Quellenkritik (3) which is the critical evaluation of primary sources.

Ranke found that "the materials of an official character, produced in the course of the conduct of affairs, were far superior to narrative sources as tools for discovering the truth about the past." (4) He was able to establish that the materials from which the historian should construct his history ought to be, wherever possible, documentary sources. "The best sources were the dated correspondence of the time, the minutes of meetings, the contemporary despatches of diplomatists, and the memoranda presented to or resulting from meetings where history on a large or small scale was being made." (5)

* References will be found at the end of the paper.

Ranke's students continued his critical evaluation of sources and helped to raise the standard of historiography. The nineteenth century saw "the emergence of the professional" (6) in historical research whereby scientific methods were used by the historian in his efforts to discover and his desire to state what he believes to be the truth. (7)

Since the nineteenth century, primary sources of information have become indispensable for the research of a particular period, an event or a personality. Gilbert said that "serious history ought to be based on archival research." (8) According to Barzun and Graff, in historiography "a primary source is distinguished from a secondary by the fact that the former gives the words of the witnesses or first recorders of an event."(9)

II

PRIMARY SOURCES

A. Definitions and Characteristics of Primary Sources

Many different terms have been used to describe primary source materials, and these include archives, manuscripts, private papers, and historical documents. Posner defines "archives" as the "records of a government agency or other organization or institution having enduring value because of the information they contain." (10) Posner also applies the term "to the records of families and individuals, especially if consciously organized for preservation." (11)

According to Brooks, "Some of the characteristics that cause various kinds of materials to be called by different names derive from the

manner in which they have been preserved rather than from their original nature." (12) Brooks went further by qualifying primary source materials as "unpublished primary sources" rather than "unprinted." (13) He indicated that whatever the term one uses, "all those responsible for unpublished primary sources must bring them together, provide for their physical preservation, arrange and describe them for prospective users, and should provide reference service on them." (14)

B. Types of Primary Sources

What then constitutes primary source materials? It is interesting to note that "practically everything is an original source," (15) and they range "from the time-worn lettering on gravestones to dusty ill-kept town records." (16) This view indicates the comprehensive nature of such sources and the difficulty of classifying them. Brooks outlines four common characteristics of primary sources:

1. Each item is unique and is not duplicated; the researcher has to understand the circumstances that produced the form in which he sees it.
2. Each document is created for a purpose. It could be to effect a transaction, convey information or to set down a record for the future, but this purpose usually has a bearing on its meaning to the research user.
3. A document may have widely varying meanings depending upon its character, i.e. the person or organization it represents. It cannot be understood without knowing something of its originator or place of origin, e.g. church, committee, government.
4. An item cannot be understood on its own without knowing its location in a file or a collection of related items which represent the same series of actions. (17)

Menzenska said that primary materials "are a unique group of items worthy of preservation due to its intrinsic interest, research value and associative relation with an institution." (18) Barzun and Graff made an interesting division between primary sources which they term "the evidence of history" into records and relics. Records are intentional transmitters of fact while relics are unpremeditated transmitters of fact. (19) Records are further subdivided into written, oral, and works of art. Although this classification does not mark fixed boundaries, it is a good description of the type of materials available for the study of history.

A further attempt at listing various types of primary source materials was done by Menzenska under the terms "manuscripts" and "archival materials." (20) Bates viewed primary sources as either "manuscripts or "printed" sources. He further subdivided "manuscripts" into personal papers, archival records, interviews and other miscellaneous items. Under "printed" sources, he listed federal publications, state publications, autobiographies and memoirs, collected speeches and letters, and contemporary articles. (21)

III

USE OF PRIMARY SOURCES IN RESEARCH: SOME EXAMPLES

One of the best ways to consider primary sources is to see how they have actually been used. The literature of the field is replete with examples of various types of primary sources that have been useful to certain kinds of research. In library research, McMullen cited examples

of sources that are useful to the writing of library history. These include government publications, hearings of committees and legislative bodies, laws, annual reports of libraries, statistics, federal and state documents, printed library catalogs, detailed circulation records, and correspondence. (22) Brichford cited the example of the University of Illinois Archives which acquired a substantial amount of original source material relating to institutional and individual contributions to the development of library science in the United States and the Midwest. (23)

Bates cited several examples of research based on primary source materials. Samuel P. Hay's book, Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920 published in 1959, drew heavily upon manuscripts produced by those who participated in the events between 1890 and 1920. These could be subdivided into four categories of materials -- personal papers, records of Federal departments, publications of organized interest groups, and official public documents. (24) Roderick Nash's book entitled Wilderness and the American Mind drew upon the manuscript collections of several archival repositories such as the Appalachian Mountain Club historical records, Wildlife Management Department files, and the personal papers of many scientists, naturalists, writers and public figures like Robert Marshall, Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and Woodrow Wilson. (25)

"The characteristic feature of history is the extraordinary and almost unlimited elasticity of its sources." (26) This aptly describes the abundance of primary source materials which are fundamental to historical research. MacPherson said "Today there is a history of everything" (27) which suggests that both the archivist and the librarian ought to respond by accumulating and preserving the appropriate materials.

McAllister advocates the collection of everything -- "everything you can get, from every source you can locate, in whatever form available -- while there is still time." (28) He lists the kinds of primary materials that are collected in the Michelson Museum and which have been found useful for the history of science. These include the standard kinds of manuscripts and documents, large and small scientific instruments, miscellaneous pieces of hardware, sheets of new data, laboratory notes, calculations, graphs, machinist's drawings, patents, photographs in every conceivable form, paintings, recordings of interviews, unpublished records of scientific and government organizations, foundations and societies, besides the standard secondary sources like publications of other scientists, textbooks, reference books, and popular articles in journals. (29)

Historical writing has undergone many changes since the time of Ranke. Allan Nevins claims that "the writing of history is always in a state of change" (30) and the writing of history now embraces all disciplines. This interdisciplinary trend in history is brought about by several developments. History today is concentrating on man and society as a whole and has become non-elitist. Historians have become more responsible to the study of men, movements, and events. (31) The volume of materials is greater, especially primary sources available for study. Wagner saw the French Revolution and its Archives Act of 1794 (upon which the historical development of modern archives can be traced) as a great boon to historians because "archives assist the discovery of truth in historical research." (32)

IV

RESEARCH TRENDS IN SPECIALIZED REPOSITORIES

Throughout the last several centuries, libraries and archives have been preserving "the recorded human experience" (33) in both traditional and non-traditional forms. Besides the national and state archives, libraries or research institutions, there has been an increase in the establishment of specialized archival institutions. All kinds of primary source materials are being accumulated and preserved for the use of specific researchers in all kinds of fields. The trend of writing social history or history "from the bottom up" (34) away from the traditional elitist course in history has made librarians and archivists aware of the necessity to reevaluate their collecting policies. Moseley feels that "we should collect everything, that even the smallest bit of information about the most trivial event or feeling in the life of the most obscure person might have some research value" (35) because traditionally, "archivists have diligently sought to preserve and make available the previously created records of organizations and outstanding individuals." (36)

A. Research on Professional Associations

Ballentine's inquiry into the status of the records and archives of professional associations revealed that an astonishingly large number of associations keep historical records or primary sources. (37) The diversity of professional interests of societies maintaining separate historical record collections was tremendous, including such associations as the American Society of Planning Officials, the American Academy of Microbiology, the Society of American Archivists, the Soceity of American Foresters, and the National Speleological Society, to name just a few.

These societies have realized the importance of keeping their old files, meeting, and housekeeping records which reflect the history of the society.

B. Research on Colleges and Universities

The development of university and college archives and the usefulness of primary sources for the writing of the history of the college has been attested to by Kielman (38), Blendon (39), and Straus (40) among others. In college and university archives one would find administrative records of various kinds, student, faculty and departmental records, records of campus societies and clubs, campus publications, research manuscripts and lecture notes of faculty, student notebooks, and memorabilia. (41) Since 1949, when the Society of American Archivists established the Committee on College and University Archives, standards have been drawn up so that today many colleges have properly organized and efficiently run archives which are sources of much more than the institutional history or the biography of the founder. (42) The archives of Catholic University, Colgate, Cornell, Harvard, and Illinois are recognized for their effectiveness and functional excellence. (43)

C. Research on Business and Industry

White (44) and Davidson (45) discovered the usefulness of business records especially for the writing of the history of a company or a firm or even a biography of the firm's founder or its family (corporate biography). Big businesses like Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, DuPont, General Motors, Ford Motor Company and Sears, Roebuck and Company have all assigned the writing of their company history. The commissioned writer or historian has found the best sources in the company's records

and archives. They have found that memoranda, correspondence, reports, charts, plans, statistical and accounting records, old photographs, patents, posters, product samples, packaging literature, and advertising literature are valuable sources of information.

D. Genealogical Research

Perhaps the most significant development of social history in the past decade has been the emphasis on family history and genealogy. Ever since the success of Alex Haley's Roots there has been a tremendous interest in tracing one's "roots," or the origin of one's family, particularly in the United States. Kyvig reported that "historical research on the American family is taking two directions: the use of available records in new ways to illuminate family life, and the collection of non-traditional materials, especially family biographies or autobiographies." (46) He lists the materials that have been used by researchers and which yielded information of value, and these range from tax and probate records, Puritan literature, diaries, parish registers, newspapers, city directories, census records, madhouse and poorhouse files, divorce dockets, illegitimacy records, and the private papers of doctors. Jeffrey illustrated how James R. McGovern's study, Yankee Family, was based on family papers and diaries of two New England families from the seventeenth century to 1920. (47) Another book, The Family Life of Ralph Josselin; A Seventeenth Century Clergyman by Alan Macfarlane, relied heavily on Josselin's diary and account books. Jeffrey (48) and Culbert (49) wrote about the activities of the Anonymous Families History Project started in 1970 by Richard D. Brown, Tamara Hereven, and John Modell which seeks to gather in a central

location a nationwide sampling of family biographies, thus assembling a large, though inevitably uneven, sample.

E. Research on Non-Elites

In line with this trend in the "non-elitist" approach to history and the study of family histories much interest has been generated and research is being undertaken on the history of minority groups, such as women and racially discriminated populations. Moseley defined the "new women's history" as that of "all women and their activities, achievements, and relationships" (50) and that it should be seen "as adding a dimension to history, not as substituting one kind of history for another." (51) Demographic sources, census and statistical data, company personnel records, reform school, prison, court, hospital, as well as records of the numerous women's organizations are all essential sources of information, particularly for the study of lower and working-class women. Fishbein (52) described the primary resources available in the National Archives for the study of the "labor classes", and these include the files of several government agencies, committees, boards, and commissions.

V

ORAL HISTORY: A UNIQUE PRIMARY SOURCE

One primary source that is becoming increasingly important and popular, especially in relation to research into "people's history", is oral history. The term "oral history" is relatively new but the technique has been used as far back as ancient times. Davis states that oral history is "the offspring of history's most ancient technique and its most modern

technology." (53) The ancient technique of interviewing is combined with the use of the tape-recorder, a product of the technological age, to produce a new type of historical evidence. Basically "oral history is the process of getting primary source material from both elitist and common citizens through taping their impressions, views, and accounts of events as they experienced them." (54) Many arguments have arisen as to what exactly is oral history. Stephenson feels that "definitions are hazardous and subject to change." (55) It is much easier to describe the usefulness of oral history than to define it.

Since the late Allan Nevins began the Oral History Project Office at Columbia University in 1948, oral history (which is "nothing more than a branch of historical research" (56)) has caught the attention of many. By 1965 numerous colleges and universities were following the lead of Columbia and establishing oral history units. (57) State and local historical societies began to supplement their manuscript holdings with oral history interviews while foundations, business corporations, labor unions, hospitals, churches, and associations plunged into the field or engaged existing oral history agencies to conduct projects for them. (58) The technique has been employed for historical research in such diverse fields as politics, science, the arts, agriculture, natural resources, industry, labor, and ethnic and local history.

The oral history interview, on tape and in transcript form, has so many uses in historical research that to list them all would be a mammoth, if not impossible, task. Suffice it to say that its value has been admitted and the literature is filled with examples of the usefulness of this primary source of information and this new form of historical evidence.

"The important thing about oral history is not that it is sound, although that can be important too, but that it is a first hand person account of past events or a way of life that is of historical interest." (59) As historical evidence, Dyer feels that oral history is important because it records "the testimony of that large section of the population which does not create or keep written records but which, within the area of its own occupations and lifestyles, can supplement more traditional forms of document." (60) Moss agrees that oral history projects "can probe more deeply into political and economic and social subjects, collecting candid reflections of people, issues and institutions to provide grist for analytic historians." (61) Stephenson feels that "the new kind of autobiographical account that emerges as a result of the oral history research process is a new kind of historical document. It stands as an attempt at a firsthand interpretation of a given series of events and might serve as an aid in understanding contemporary historical movements." (62)

Another benefit of oral history that is not often considered is the fact that the oral interview "can furnish leads to the location and existence of documents unknown to the researcher, clues to the background surrounding their creation, and may even help evaluate collections." (63) This has been proven in many oral history programs, notably in the Presidential libraries where the solicitation of personal papers and manuscripts is simultaneously done during the oral history interview. Interviewing provides a marvelous opportunity for the interviewer to request the papers of the interviewee. In this way, many documents which might otherwise be lost, can be preserved and made available to scholars. Sometimes "tape recorded interviews provided clues which led to further research in archival records and contained significant information not available from other sources." (64)

DePasquale (65) and Moss (66) wrote that interviews are also being increasingly used as classroom teaching aids. "Instead of telling primary or secondary students about the life of an individual or his role in an important event, they can listen to his account of what occurred." (67) The value and benefits to students who study history by using such primary sources is enormous. History thus becomes more interesting and more vivid because it is recounted in the words of that particular person. Moss (68) also describes the increasing use of oral history materials in the classroom.

Many criticisms have been levelled at oral history as historical ecidence, usually for lack of objectivity. Key (69) responds to this criticism by raising the question whether any personal record can be accepted as completely objective. Stephenson replies to this criticism by saying that oral histories may be superior to many written records because "we are aware that archives are replete with edited and 'doctored' diaries and memoranda." (70) However, she does concede, like all oral historians do, that as a research tool, oral interviews have definite limitations, especially the extraordinary facility of human beings for forgetting unpleasant things. Moss underscores this point when he said that "the record produced by an interview should never be confused with the original event, nor even with the memory of that event." (71)

With the increasing use of oral history materials in research, there is a need for evaluation and analysis of these materials. Several attempts have been made to evaluate certain programs and interviews. However in 1979, the Oral History Association forged national standards for evaluating oral history projects. These standards cover guidelines for all aspects of the oral history process from the initial interview, its

conduct and content, and the transcription. The availability of these standards will hardly fail to affect the quality of production in the 1980's. (72) This is a big step forward in improving the quality of oral history as a unique primary source.

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